

# Lions Club vice president still waiting for new text amendment

■ Hoping change would make erecting nonprofit signs more affordable

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Olney Lions Club Vice President Paul Bolton is frustrated that he is still unable to erect two additional signs within the community to attract potential members to his service organization.

Once again he finds himself facing a roadblock, despite going through what he describes as "all the proper steps."

"I am obviously frustrated, and feel that I am being ignored by the county," Bolton said. "These people are supposed to be public servants, but I think they follow poor business procedures."

Last fall, Bolton learned that the signs, which typically feature the service organization's logo along with its meeting place and time, would require a county permit to erect.

When he applied for the permit, he learned the fee was \$225 per sign, in addition to the cost of purchasing and installing the sign, which he estimates to be \$150.

"Our club can't afford to put up any signs with fees like that," he said. "We are not a commercial business, we can't write this off as an expense, and we can't pay to post our signs. When the regulations were written they didn't seem to take into account the nonprofit charitable organizations."

He requested a waiver from the Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services (DPS), which was denied on the basis that it did not have the authority to grant it.

Bolton learned that neighboring counties did not reduce or waive sign permit fees for nonprofit organizations, but that their costs were much lower. Howard County charges \$55 and Prince George's County charges \$25, both for permits of signs of less than 25 square feet, he said.

"These permit fees seem fair

and reasonable, and I don't believe that our club would have a problem affording that," he said.

Bolton then enlisted the help of County Council President George L. Leventhal, and questioned what service was being provided to the public by the Department of Permitting Services that justified five to 10 times the rate of neighboring counties.

Leventhal (D-At large) responded by submitting Zoning Text Amendment 05-13 on Sept. 27, which would give the Permitting Services director the authority to waive or reduce the sign fee for nonprofit community service organizations.

A council public hearing was held Nov. 1, and representatives from the county executive's office and the Planning Board expressed concerns regarding lost revenue and the wording of the text amendment on the definition of a nonprofit organization.

The County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee held a worksession on Nov. 28 to review the amendment and unanimously recommend enacting it after clarifying changes, including defining eligible nonprofit organizations as those exempt from federal income tax, and limiting the size of the signs to those smaller than set by regulation.

On Dec. 6, the Montgomery County Council unanimously passed the text amendment, allowing the Department of Permitting Services to waive certain sign permit application fees. The DPS was charged with rewriting the regulations.

In January, Bolton sent a letter to Department of Permitting Services to inquire as to its progress.

"The letter was ignored, I am afraid, until I wrote a follow-up letter to the director," he said. "Their response was that nothing had been done and that they were very busy."

In April, Bolton wrote again to Susan Scala-Denby, permitting services manager. She had advised him earlier that she was designated

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to rewrite the regulations, Bolton said, but again he received no response.

"I don't wish to complain if they are truly too busy to do this writing task, but it has been over four months," Bolton said. "I've made calls, sent letters and e-mails. It doesn't appear that they plan to do anything except stall and ignore. I even offered to help with the rewriting."

The Gazette contacted Leventhal's office on Friday. His acting chief of staff, Patty Vitale, offered to contact Department of Permitting Services to request an update on the status of regulations regarding the text amendment.

On Monday, Bolton received an e-mail from Vitale, which included a forwarded message from Scala-Denby. In the e-mail, Scala-Denby assured Vitale that the regulations would be completed when she returns from the Fourth of July holiday.

Once written, the language will then have to be approved by the council.

Bolton was pleased that he finally got a response, but said he is waiting until everything is finalized before moving forward on the signs.

"I am just anxious to see what the reduced cost will be to nonprofit organizations and whether or not it will be cost-prohibitive," he said. "I just want to see this pushed forward."